

Virgin Islands Marine Protected Area Network (VIMPAN) Support Summary (2014-2015)

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Background

The Virgin Islands Marine Protected Area Network (VIMPAN) is a multi-agency coral reef management group working to increase collaboration of reef management efforts in the region. The Nature Conservancy (TNC) provided support to VIMPAN by planning meetings, hosting webinars, supporting revisions to the Memoranda of Understanding (MOU) between Department of Planning and Natural Resources (DPNR) and National Park Service (NPS) to formalize VIMPAN, updating the VIMPAN Coordination Framework, supporting the development of a USVI Protected Area Trust, maintaining the website and writing newsletters. See below for additional details on activities supported:

VIMPAN Meeting Support

- A VIMPAN meeting was held in conjunction with the Virgin Islands Reef Meeting (VI Reef Meeting), on May 30, 2014. This meeting included both VIMPAN members and partners not formally included in VIMPAN. The objective of the meeting was to have a broad discussion regarding coral protection, research and management in the Territory to inform VIMPAN efforts. The additional meeting participants included faculty from the University of the Virgin Islands (UVI). Meeting participants were facilitated through a frank discussion about gaps and barriers to coral reef protection and opportunities for new efficiencies and collaborations to advance coral protection in the territory. The meeting participants also provided feedback on the ReefConnect.org site and provided input to the then Director of the Department of Planning and Natural Resources (DPNR) Division of Coastal Zone Management (CZM), Jean-Pierre Oriol, regarding the USVI Territorial Coral Reef Monitoring Program (TCRMP).
- In June 2014 another VIMPAN meeting was held at the DPNR conference room at the St. Thomas airport. Members participated both in person and over the phone. At this meeting we examined the VIMPAN MOU with both the Director of DPNR CZM and the Chief of Natural Resources for the NPS on St. Croix, Zandy Hillis-Starr.
- In September 2014 another VIMPAN meeting was held to further follow up on the development of the MOU. This meeting was specifically with the Director of DPNR and CZM and the Chief of Natural Resources of the NPS. Following this MOU focused webinar, the MOU is in final draft form and we still have minor revisions to make. It was circulated in early October to VIMPAN members, expressly the Superintendents of both the NPS on St. Croix, Joel Tutein, and St. John, Brion Fitzgerald, and acting DPNR Commissioner, Jean-Pierre Oriol. We are making every effort to finalize and sign the document while JP Oriol is acting DPNR Commissioner.
- In September 2014 we hosted a technical webinar for VIMPAN members on the updated TNC Coastal Resilience tools. With geographical representation from all three islands in the Territory, and institutional representation from all VIMPAN members including DPNR CZM, NPS and NOAA, it was an effective way to target members for a technical presentation. The action items from the webinar include the sharing of data and GIS layers between TNC, DPNR and UVI. Pedro Nieves (DPNR) and Steve Schill (TNC) have already completed one of the action items to share updated LIDAR data. The second action item, acquiring data/GIS layers on manholes and ghuts to analyze saltwater intrusion will be requested from UVI. A particular outcome of the conference is that TNC and DPNR GIS specialists are now communicating and sharing information.
- A VIMPAN meeting was hosted and the Department of Planning and Natural Resources (DPNR) on October 19, 2015. In attendance were representatives from

DPNR's Divisions of Coastal Zone Management and Division of Fish and Wildlife, National Park Service (St. Croix and St. John), NOAA, and The Nature Conservancy. Agenda topics included VIMPAN updates, website and forum, Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), and work group development. The updates are an important opportunity for VIMPAN members to update each other in person on research, outreach, management, etc. The MOU was discussed briefly and the action item was to send it out to the managers at DPNR and NPS for review and signature routing. Finally, VIMPAN work groups were established, specifically the Technical Research Work Group and the Education and Outreach Work Group.

VIMPAN momentum and coordination has been difficult over the project period. The plan for VIMPAN members (NPS and DPNR) to plan meetings was not successful, without an organizing partner. While there is energy and excitement around VIMPAN and the Technical Research Work Group, the planning of meetings and the sustainability of VIMPAN in general will continue to be a challenge due to the packed schedules of VIMPAN members.

Coordination Framework

- The VIMPAN Coordination Framework developed through previous awards was updated in to identify current members, initiatives and document progress. The Framework was not a priority for the committee members due to emphasis on developing and obtaining signature of the VIMPAN MOU.
- In December 2014 the final draft of the VIMPAN MOU was routed to both DPNR and NPS for review and signature. A reminder email was sent in mid-January 2015 to check in with both DPNR and NPS to see if additional support was needed. The effort to establish a formal MOU for VIMPAN is a longstanding priority for VIMPAN due to the change of administration at the USVI government level and extended personal leave for one of the VIMPAN members, the MOU was not signed. Next steps for the committee should include better understanding the interest on the part of DPNR and NPS to support and sign the MOU.

VIMPAN Communications

- The VIMPAN website was maintained and revamped along with the rest of ReefConnect.org, to make it more visually appealing and user friendly. These revisions will address several of the suggestions identified in the website survey in 2014. The September 2014 issue of the VIMPAN Times, the VIMPAN newsletter, contains two articles. The first is a story on the Coastal Resilience webinar. The second informed readers of the role and purpose of VIMPAN.

USVI Territorial Protected Areas Trust (TPAT)

This activity took place during both a territorial gubernatorial election and subsequent change in administration directly affecting progress of both the Territorial Protected Area Trust (TPAT) and the Virgin Islands Marine Protected Area Network (VIMPAN). Working through the transition of government we were able to successfully engage the new Administration of Governor Mapp in this project through the following activities:

- In early 2015, TNC met with new Commissioners (“Commissioner Designees or Interim Commissioners” at the time) of the Departments of Agriculture, Tourism, and Planning and Natural Resources to discuss their support for the establishment of a new comprehensive protected area system in the USVI. An Ecotourism Workshop held at TNC’s office and hosted by the Department of Tourism in February 2015, provided a venue to begin to address the specifics, including reviewing the TPAT concept. The then Commissioner Designees of Agriculture and Tourism specifically indicated they support a comprehensive protected area system initiative.
- In a parallel effort, though not funded through this Cooperative Agreement, TNC continued engagement and participation of the terrestrial protected area working group through the Department of Agriculture’s Forest Legacy Program to acquire conservation lands in anticipation of moving them into the VI Parks and Protected Area System. Each new acquisition fills a gap in the patch-work of conservation lands to help create a more holistic and ecosystem level terrestrial park system.
- In June 2015 Governor Kenneth Mapp was informed of the Caribbean Challenge Initiative (CCI) and the USVI’s commitment to it and the pledge of specific actions (announced by former Governor DeJongh in 2013/14). Governor Mapp was also briefed on the interest and benefit to advance a comprehensive protected area system and the benefits of establishing a Territorial Protected Area Trust.
- Using the road map generated during the 2013 VI Protected Area Sustainable Finance Workshop, a draft Bill was developed by USVI Senator Novelle Francis. This draft legislation is compatible with the vision for creating a TPAT. In July 2015 the draft Bill was submitted to the USVI Legislature’s Legal Council by Senator Francis. Following the Legislature’s Legal Council review and recommendations the Senator requested TNC’s assistance in revising language and developing alternative versions and scenarios for the implementation entity and mechanisms of a TPAT.
- In September 2015 a meeting with DPNR Commissioner Dawn Henry introduced her to the CCI, the USVI endorsement and the TPAT opportunities. The meeting included a discussion on structural options and conceptual pros and cons for consolidation of management of the various USVI protected areas. A follow up meeting with Commissioner Henry in October 2015 explained how a TPAT could assist efforts to improve function of the already declared protected areas.

Through this project progress was made on the establishment of a TPAT through engaging and securing clear interest by the Governor, his Cabinet and members of the USVI Legislature to further advance and fully vet the establishment of a TPAT. A roadmap of next steps to continue support for the establishment of a TPAT was developed by TNC staff Aaron Hutchins and will be used guide the TNC Caribbean program and VIMPAM partners as they continue to explore and support the development of a TPAT for the USVI.